



Video Story Transcript

Taming the Fire: A Black Heritage Search

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Link to YouTube Video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lqeljEyTZjg>

Note : The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

Hello, my name is Sheila Arnold. I have to give you two names: Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman. Those were the only two people, the only two black people I ever learned about in my elementary and middle school years in the 1970s and 1980s. How was it! But somewhere around the beginning of my high school years, in 1979 or so, I began to look for my people. I don't really, know truthfully, why that, was the trigger for that but I think it's because I started paying attention to the news.

I can remember sometime early in my 10th grade year, I think about 1980 or so, I went over to the March on Washington to ask for Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday to be a national holiday. I remember that myself and some of my classmates we skipped school, got on some buses, and some subways, (I lived in Annandale, Virginia, which is a suburb of Washington D.C.) and we got over to Washington D.C. I remember that, that the mall, the Washington National Mall, was just filled with all these black people. I've never seen anything like that before. And I, I heard every word, every speech; I felt it does come all into me. It was wonderful. And then Stevie Wonder got up and started singing. We all sing with them. "Happy Birthday to 'im. Happy Birthday to 'im. Happy Birthday. Happy Birthday to you. Happy Birthday to 'im. Happy Birthday." We loved it.

Well, I started learning more and more around that time of my life. I remember, that there were times that I started looking at other parts of African-American history. One of the things that was happening is my mom was introducing me to other arts and plays and things like that. That was when I found "For Colored Girls That Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf" into Ntozake Shange, the play that was in Washington D.C.. Oh! She got me a copy of that script. And then we went to go see "Ain't Misbehavin'." And we went to go see "Bubblin' Brown Sugar," about the Harlem Renaissance artist and the musicians. And I was in love with learning more. I had been working as a library school assistant since I started high school and I worked in one

of my classes at study hall and then whenever I had a free moment, I was in that library. And while I was working in the library, I began to come across other African-American writers I never knew anything about. I already knew about poet, the poet Paul Laurence Dunbar and, of course, I knew about God's Trombones writer, James Weldon Johnson, because we presented their pieces at the church that I went to. But when I came across The Anthology by Arnold Adolph, I was introduced to Gwendolyn Brooks. And I met, I, I met Nikki Giovanni, Cotton Candy On A Rainy Day. Ah, that was one of my favorites. And James Baldwin...that one even got banned from my high school and my mom went and bought it for me. It was great.

So I started learning all of these things but it was like a, a quiet learning. And although a fire begun, it was a quiet fire. One that, one that had to do with just reading and maybe sharing with people at the black church that I attended. And sometimes doing some pieces for my forensics team at school but very quiet. Well, one day I was bored and I was looking for something to read because that's what I do, when I'm bored. I was looking for something to read and I usually do. I started looking to my parents' things. Went through my mom's stash, ya, nothing. Went to my dad's always cluttered, never clean, room but always filled with books. And I started looking. And I came across a book. I came across a book that shocked me. The Black Book. I started looking at it and I could not put it down. First, I was disgusted and just appalled at some of the images that were there. They were, they were pictures of, of black bodies hanging from trees, of men smiling as they saw what was being, a person that was beaten on the back, the welts on their back. A group of white gentlemen posing for the picture proudly as they surrounded the smoldering body of a black man that had been burnt. As visceral as those pictures were and as disgusting, in the book I also found great amusement and delight. Colorful ads for skin lightening. Cures, using voodoo charms and Hexis. That was kind of cool, some of the things they used to do. I was amazed by this book and I couldn't put it down.

Then, I got to the middle of the book and I found patents. P-A-T-E-N-T-S. Patents. Yes, patents. And patents, I knew, I knew what patents were. Patents were what you did if you made something. If you were an inventor. And I looked at them. Patents. You mean, black people have been inventors? Oh, I was hot now. Mm, hmm. All that fire that was a small little campfire, it rose up with me and it was a bonfire, wildfire. I was angry and I went back to the beginning of the black book and I started looking through it again. But I had new eyes this time. My eyes were feeding. What information I had not learned?!

Well, the next day that fire had not gone away at all. I arrived at school with the book in my hand. I couldn't wait to get to my favorite class, history class. And I couldn't wait to be able to talk to my teacher, my favorite teacher, Mrs. Elliott, she was my history class teacher. She also happened to be a white teacher. I walked into the classroom. I was the epitome of mad, black, teenage girl. Most people hadn't even seen nothing like that in my school. There were 13 blacks at my school out of 2,000 students. I walked in that classroom. Other classmates would just walk in along with me. But I walked in. I had that book clasped around my chest. I walked in, walked right up to her desk, slammed the book down on her desk, and said "Why aren't you teaching us this?"

All the air went out of the room. My classmates were completely quiet. They had never seen anything like this. I was angry and I demanded an answer. I had no idea what to say but I knew somebody better tell me something. Well, unbeknownst to me, Mrs. Elliott had been taking black history classes every summer for the last few summers. She was fascinated with black history. And she had a deep desire to teach it at the school but she had no clue how she, a white teacher, was going to teach black history at a predominantly white school when she would only see black students every once in a while. And so, she looked at me and she said, "Do you really want to learn this?"

“Yes I do.”

“OK then.” And right then, right then, at that very moment, Miss Elliott changed everything in her classroom and she began to teach black history. She brought in videos and images. And she had us look through all kinds of books and hear different things. This was completely different. Everybody in my class was excited because they had never heard it either. I was the only black student in that class but we all were learning. Miss Elliott even brought my mother in, and my mom talked about segregation. She talked about how she had to drink from a colored fountain. The kids looked at my mom, my mom who most of them knew, they couldn't believe that she'd had to do that. That she'd had to go all the way into Washington D.C. just to go to an all black school. That she had had to go to the bathrooms, colored only bathrooms.

It changed all of us. But Miss Elliott didn't just stop there. She started teaching all kinds of cross-cultural things. We learned more about other cultures than we had ever learned before. And we were a group that was eager. And as classmates, we couldn't wait to learn more about diversity. It was amazing. Well, one of the girls came in and she had found out that they were killing chimpanzees in one of the countries in Africa. Immediately, we all got on board. We contacted the World, World...I can't remember it...WWF and World Wide Wildlife Federation...I think it was World Wildlife Federation. We contacted them immediately and we said, "Can we do something?" Well, right then we started a fundraiser, we went and visited with the head offices in, in Washington D.C. It was exciting and we became burgeoning activists. Wow! It as an incredible year but Miss Elliott didn't stop with our year. She kept right on teaching for as long as I knew her. Teaching all that she could about all cultures.

I have to tell you, I was a raging fire when I walked into that room. I had been a campfire and I turned into wild wildfire and I was ready to burn everything in my path and hurt as many people as I could along with it. But Miss Elliot, she was a great teacher and she tended that fire. And she, she helped that fire to grow in the right places. And she made sure that the fire could live but that it wouldn't burn wildly. Most of all, she ensured the fire would never go out.